

## Character Class

# Dead Levels

By Kolja Raven Liqueur



The *Player's Handbook* details eleven **character classes** for players to choose from. Two of these character classes, the **barbarian** and **monk**, feature a special ability at every **level** of advancement. The remaining nine classes are not so lucky, enduring two or more levels during which no special abilities are gained. This article seeks to fill those "dead levels" with special abilities that have an imperceptible impact on game balance while remaining thematically consistent to the flavor of each character class.

While **base attack bonuses** and **saving throws** typically increase every level, there's no harm in admitting that such benefits don't inspire the same enthusiasm as a new special ability. Some players hate nothing more than attaining a new level only to receive, for example, 5 **hit points**, 2 **skill points**, and a +1 **bonus** on **Fortitude saves** for all their hard adventuring work. Indeed, this can be disheartening for players who make a point of pursuing a single class instead of multiclassing.

This article offers minor special abilities that fill the normal "dead levels" of each core character class. These abilities have been chosen to complement the thematic elements of each class and assist in roleplaying wherever possible. They are meant to be more "flavorful" than "powerful" while also giving players something to anticipate at each level, regardless of whichever class they choose to play. These dead level abilities should not be considered a fix or patch for the core character classes.

The devoted spellcasting classes, which is to say the spellcasting classes that gain new spells per day or spells known every level, can be said to gain special abilities each time they advance, especially the **sorcerer** and **wizard**. This is less true for the **cleric** and **druid**, who merely gain additional **spells** per day at every even-numbered level of the same repertoire they could already cast. The dead level abilities presented in this article keep these spell progressions in mind, so that the least significant abilities have been granted to sorcerers and wizards.

## BARBARIAN

The barbarian serves as one of the finest examples of character class design. Not only do barbarians receive a special ability at every level, but their abilities follow a logical progression that easily can be extrapolated upward through epic levels as needed. Moreover, the abilities that are granted steadily become more powerful with each passing level, until mighty rage is gained at 20th level: the perfect crowning ability.



## BARD

The **bard** has ten dead levels but gains spells per day and spells known during each one of those levels (which can be considered special abilities in their own right). Still, certain prestige classes grant +1 level of arcane spellcasting at every level along with powerful abilities to boot. This means that minor abilities are permissible during each dead level.

**Rally Performance (Ex):** Starting at 2nd level, a bard hones his skill as a public musician and can reroll a Perform **check** once per day, but only when attempting to impress audiences for the purpose of earning money. A bard must take the result of the reroll, even if it's worse than the original roll. See Perform on page 79 of the *Player's Handbook*.

**Refine Performance (Ex):** At 4th level, a bard learns how to make his performances more appealing to the public of a prosperous city and is considered to have rolled at least a 2 on each d10 or d6 when determining how much money was earned each day from a Perform check. See Perform on page 79 of the *Player's Handbook*. At 5th, 7th, 10th, 11th, 13th, 16th, and 17th level, a bard is considered to have rolled 1 number higher on each d10 (for example, a least 3 at 5th level, at least 4 at 7th level, etc.). By extension, a bard is considered to have rolled at least 3 on each d6 at 7th level, at least 4 at 11th level, and at least 5 at 16th level. At 19th level, a bard earns the maximum amount of money for his performance.

**Designer's Note:** Refine performance is largely ineffectual to bards, since adventuring will typically earn more gold than public performances ever will. This ability merely secures their publicly regarded acclaim.

## CLERIC

The cleric has nineteen dead levels, but this is mitigated by their one and only special ability: turn or rebuke undead. The turning damage for this ability steadily increases every level (2d6 + the cleric's level + the cleric's Charisma **modifier**). Still, a prestige class that grants +1 level of divine spellcasting, normal **turn** or **rebuke undead** advancement, and special abilities at every level opens the door for a minor dead level ability.

**Undead Intuition (Ex):** Starting at 2nd level, a cleric can identify **undead** creatures during an encounter from any distance. The cleric gains a +2 bonus on Knowledge (religion) checks to identify undead creatures, but gains no insight about their special powers or vulnerabilities. See Knowledge checks on page 78 of the *Player's Handbook*. Moreover, the cleric can make these Knowledge (undead) checks untrained. This bonus increases by +1 for each cleric level the character takes after 2nd level.

**Designer's Note:** Undead identification is only one part of the Knowledge (religion) skill, and even then, undead intuition does not reveal the strengths or weaknesses of a creature. Knowledge (religion) and undead intuition combined, however, will permit clerics to recognize any undead creature on sight, which seems realistic for clerics.

## DRUID

The druid is the second-place offender of dead levels. For a class to have special abilities for eighteen out of twenty levels, one wonders how two more abilities would have made a difference, especially at such high levels (17th and 19th level). The two dead level abilities presented here adequately fill those gaps without derailing the original class design.

**Woodland Sprint (Ex):** At 17th level, a druid may move at her normal **speed** through thorns, briars, and

overgrown areas that have been magically manipulated. She does not take **damage** or suffer any other impairment, since she becomes immune to such magical effects.

**Repel Nature's Lure (Ex):** At 19th level, a druid gains **spell resistance** against the **spell-like abilities** of **fey** (such as dryads, pixies, and sprites) equal to her current druid level + 10. To affect the druid with a spell-like ability, a fey spellcaster must get a result on a **caster level check** (1d20 + caster level; see Spell Resistance on page 177 of the *Player's Handbook*) that equals or exceeds the druid's spell resistance.

**Designer's Note:** Woodland sprint and repel nature's lure are direct extensions of the woodland stride and resist nature's lure abilities of druids. While resist nature's lure in particular may be considered powerful, this ability is granted at a high enough level so as to have a negligible impact on game balance.

## FIGHTER

The **fighter**, with nine dead levels (one at every odd level), has one of the most logical progressions of special abilities. They gain a bonus feat every two levels if you imagine the first bonus feat to be granted during a conceptual "0" level for apprentices. As an option-based class, their dead level abilities also incorporate a degree of choice in keeping with the overall fighter level design.



**Physical Prowess (Ex):** Starting at 3rd level, a fighter gets a bonus to some aspect of his ability checks that makes him a better warrior. The fighter gains an additional bonus at 5th level and every two fighter levels thereafter (7th, 9th, 11th, 13th, 15th, 17th, and 19th). The bonus must be drawn from the following list.

**Applied Force (Ex):** A fighter can administer force to the weakest points of inanimate objects effectively, giving the character a +1 bonus on **Strength** checks to break or burst items (see page 165 of the *Player's Handbook*).

**Combat Bearing (Ex):** A fighter can steady himself to fight in precarious situations, giving the character a +1 bonus on **Dexterity** checks to avoid falling when damaged while balancing or moving quickly across difficult surfaces (see Balance on page 67 of the *Player's Handbook*).

**Designer's Note:** At most, physical prowess can be abused by taking the same bonus nine times in a row. Having done so, however, the character will be a 19th-level fighter and should be rewarded for his devotion to a single class without multiclassing. If that means the character can easily bend bars or break doors, so be it. Such destructive force is their due.

**Stamina Reserve (Ex):** A fighter can push his body more than normal, giving the character a +1 bonus on **Constitution** checks to continue running (see page 144 of the *Player's Handbook*) and to avoid nonlethal damage from a forced march (see page 164 of the *Player's Handbook*).

## MONK

The monk is the only other core class, aside from the barbarian, that has no dead levels. Players always have

something to look forward to with the monk, which boasts the most colorful and unique special abilities of all the character classes.

## PALADIN

The **paladin** has eight dead levels, none of which occur until 7th level. Despite being front loaded with special abilities, paladins gain smite evil and remove disease for the remainder of their levels, along with a special mount and minor spellcasting abilities. Despite these abilities, paladins still gain nothing except for base attack bonuses, hit points, and skill points at 7th and 13th level. Their dead level ability comes with two choices, the first of which has a prerequisite.

**Righteous Cause (Ex):** Starting at 7th level, a paladin is either rewarded with a bonus to form a lawful community or route out duplicitous intent. The paladin gains an additional bonus at 8th, 11th, 13th, 14th, 16th, 17th, and 19th level. The bonus must be drawn from one of the following two abilities.

*Inspiring Presence (Ex):* A paladin can become the rallying standard for decency and fairness. If a paladin takes the Leadership feat (see page 106 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*), the character gains +1 to her leadership score, but only for the purpose of attracting 1st-level followers.

*Discerning Insight (Ex):* A paladin can recognize when a person is trustworthy or not, giving the character a +1 bonus on Sense Motive checks when trying to get a "hunch" about the subject's personality after a 1-minute conversation (see Sense Motive on page 81 of the *Player's Handbook*).

**Designer's Note:** Inspiring presence is weakened by the fact that it comes with a prerequisite feat. Discerning insight grants a bonus to Sense Motive checks, which is a class skill for paladins. If the paladin really needed to sense evil-aligned intent, she would simply use her 1st-level ability to *detect evil* at will. The "hunch" bonus is largely an incentive to role-play.

## RANGER

The **ranger** has five dead levels, the first of which occurs at 12th level. Their favored enemy bonuses follow a logical progression (one every five levels) if you imagine the 1st favored enemy ability to be granted during a conceptual "0" level for apprentices. Rangers consistently gain new spells per day during all of their dead levels, and so their dead level abilities augment the minor aspects of what rangers are already good at doing.

**Woodland Hunter (Ex):** At 12th level, a ranger can make "get along in the wild" checks while moving at his full overland speed. See Survival on page 83 of the *Player's Handbook*.

**Perceptive Tracker (Ex):** At 14th level, a ranger never takes longer than a **full-round action** to find tracks with a Survival check. A second roll is still required to follow any discovered tracks.

**Seasoned Explorer (Ex):** At 16th level, a ranger can make Survival checks to gain a bonus on Fortitude saves against severe weather while moving at his full overland speed. See Survival on page 83 of the *Player's Handbook*.

**Instinctive Tracker (Ex):** At 18th level, a ranger takes a **standard action** to find tracks with a Survival check, allowing the character to simultaneously move at his speed.



**Survivalist (Ex):** At 19th level, the ranger becomes so certain in the use of Survival that the character can use it reliably even under adverse conditions. When making a skill check with Survival, the ranger may **take 10** even if stress and distractions would normally prevent the character from doing so.

**Designer's Note:** These abilities are all based around the "fine print" uses of Survival that rarely see use in all but the most outdoor-centric adventures. These abilities merely add, in unassuming ways, to the wilderness supremacy that rangers already enjoy.

## ROGUE

The **rogue** is the biggest offender of dead levels. Similar to the druid, the rogue is missing two special abilities out of twenty levels, but unlike the druid, the rogue has no spells to shore up these deficiencies. More unusual still is the distinctive lack of a crowning 20th-level ability to complete the class. As such, rogues can enjoy more significant dead level abilities than normal.



**Makeshift Tools (Ex):** At 14th level, a rogue becomes so familiar with mechanisms and traps that the character can make Disable Device checks without a set of thieves' tools at no penalty. See Disable Device on page 72 of the *Player's Handbook*.

**Skilled Saboteur (Ex):** At 20th level, a rogue makes quick work out of mechanisms and traps, disabling devices in one-half the normal time. See Disable Device on page 72 of the *Player's Handbook*. A device that normally takes 1 **round** to disable now takes 1 standard action, allowing the character to make a **move action** afterward.

**Designer's Note:** While the skilled saboteur ability takes the idea of a "flavorful" dead level ability one step further to be a "beneficial" ability, players needed a significant incentive to actually take all twenty levels of the rogue class.

## SORCERER

The sorcerer, similar to the cleric, has nineteen dead levels. The sorcerer parts from the cleric, however, in that new spells known are gained at every level (which can be considered special abilities in their own right). Still, a prestige class that grants +1 level of spellcasting and special abilities at every level makes a minor dead level ability infinitely possible.

**Magical Affinity (Ex):** Starting at 2nd level, a sorcerer can identify a certain creature type during an encounter by virtue of inheriting his magical ability from a member of that creature type. The type must include at least one creature with an arcane spell-like ability (such as dragon, magical beast, or outsider). Once this choice is made, it cannot be reversed. The sorcerer gains a +2 bonus on Knowledge (arcana) checks to identify such creature types, but he

gains no insight about their special powers or vulnerabilities. See Knowledge on page 78 of the *Player's Handbook*. Moreover, the sorcerer can make these Knowledge (arcana) checks untrained. This bonus increases by +1 for each sorcerer level the character takes after 2nd level.

**Designer's Note:** The magical affinity ability merely allows sorcerers to say, "That's a dragon!" or "That's a magical beast!" The advantage of this ability surfaces when, for example, a dragon or magical beast assumes a form with a type other than its own.

## WIZARD

The wizard has fifteen dead levels, but she shares a lot in common with the sorcerer in that new spells are gained at every level (which can be considered special abilities in their own right). The primary difference between the two classes is that while sorcerers lose nothing by taking a prestige class granting +1 level of arcane spellcasting at every level, wizards miss out on up to four metamagic or item creation feats. As such, wizards are granted the least significant dead level ability.

**Animated Script (Su):** Starting at 2nd level, a wizard can magically animate the writing in their spellbook, causing the inked symbols and words to migrate across the page. Doing so increases the Spellcraft **DC** for another wizard attempting to decipher or prepare spells from their spellbook by the inscribing wizard's Intelligence modifier + 1 at the cost of 5 gp per inscribed page. See Spells Copied from Another's Spellbook or Scroll on page 179 of the *Player's Handbook*. For each level in which the character does not gain a bonus feat after 2nd level, the wizard can increase the Spellcraft **DC** by +1 at the cost of an additional 5 gp per inscribed page (for example, +2 for 10 gp per page at 3rd level, +3 for 15 gp per page at 4th level, +4 for 20 gp per page at 6th level, and so on). The inscribing wizard can will their animated writing to stop, at which point the Spellcraft **DC** to copy a spell from another's spellbook returns to normal (**DC** 15 + spell level).

**Designer's Note:** This ability is entirely flavorful for wizards who like to keep their spell repertoire closely guarded (even more than they already guard their spellbooks).

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### About the Author

**Kolja Raven Lquette** is perhaps best known for creating *The Waking Lands* website, but he has also co-authored *Complete Mage*, *Monster Manual IV*, *Races of the Dragon* and *Weapons of Legacy*, in addition to providing material for *Five Nations*, *Complete Warrior* and various articles and enhancements for the Wizards of the Coast website.

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